

P o e t r y i n m o t i o n

Annual Merrie Monarch Festival celebrates ‘language of the heart’



Dancers from the Ho'ola Ka Mano O Hawai'i halau from Dallas,Tx. perform for a packed house at the Edith Kanaka'ole Tennis Stadium in Hilo during the second night of hula competition.

By David Nagle
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Hula. Words alone cannot describe it. And yet, it speaks to you, allures you, without saying a word. It is a language as ancient as the people for whom it is best associated, but it still captivates and charms us today. It is pure poetry in motion.

The Merrie Monarch Festival, held annually since 1964 in Hilo, is a celebration of this ancient language. According to Dottie Thompson, who has chaired the Merrie Monarch Festival since 1969, the festival is dedicated to "the Merrie Monarch" King David Kalakaua, who reigned from 1874 until his death in 1891. Kalakaua, a patron of the arts, revived many of the nearly extinct cultural traditions of the Hawaiian people, including the hula, which had been forbidden by missionaries for more than 70 years.

Since ancient Hawaiians had no written language, communication beyond the spoken word took place in the form of chants and the hula dance. "Hula and its accompanying chants recorded Hawaiian genealogy, mythology, and prayers of the heart and mind," said Thompson. "The hula was the means by which the culture, history, stories and almost every aspect of

Hawaiian life was expressed and passed down through generations."

The Merrie Monarch Festival is a week-long event, which begins every year on Easter Sunday. The festival includes Hawaiian arts and crafts, a royal parade and entertainment at local hotels in Hilo.

But, the highlight of the festival is the three nights of hula competition at the Edith Kanaka'ole Tennis Stadium. Hula halau (troupes) come from all over the state of Hawaii and the mainland United States to compete in what could be considered the Super Bowl of hula.

The first night is dedicated to individual competition, while the last two nights feature group competition. Dancers perform two kinds of hula: the kahiko, or ancient hula, with its pulsating chants and rhythms while dressed in the traditional dress of their ancestors, and the modern, or auana style, with its colorful costumes and beautiful, flowing melodies.

Kalakaua once said "hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." It is a language that still speaks to hearts today. It is, indeed, poetry in motion.



(Above) More parade participants paddle their float through the 37th Annual Merrie Monarch parade.

(Center of page) A Merrie Monarch Parade participant plays his part, literally as he sounds a call through his conch shell.

(Left) A hula dancer performs an ancient dance during the group hula competition April 28.



(Above) A mother helps her daughter celebrate in a "bubbly" way from their float during April 29 Merrie Monarch parade.

(Right) A local girl scout blows bubbles while parading through the streets of Hilo.

(Far right) USS Salvor Sailors watch from the grandstands as the second night of hula competition gets underway.



Photos by
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